

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

The Mission of our Newsletter

Mr. J.L. SINGH whose letter appears in this issue suggests that we have formal objectives for our NL so that " we will pull in the same direction." I will be glad to receive brief comments on his suggestion.

Threatened Birds of Sri Lanka, (National Red List)

T.W. Hoffman of the Ceylon Bird Club, Colombo, Sri Lanka has produced a useful, 28 page scientific brochure on the avian situation in the emerald isle. There are 26 species of endemic birds some of which are clearly related to those in India. 53 threatened resident birds of Sri Lanka are categorised as per IUCN standards as Critically Endangered (CR), Endangered (EN) and Vulnerable (VU). What interested me particularly was the hint by the author that four species which have become extinct in Ceylon in recent years - the glossy ibis, the reef heron, the fairy bluebird, and the comb duck may possibly recolonise the country by immigration from India.

Inappropriate names

In the correspondence section Thomas Gay writes on this perennial subject. I am hoping to get some news about what decision was taken on this problem by the experts at the I.O.C. meeting in South Africa this August. Perhaps Rishad Naoroji who attended the Congress will give us a report.

Scarletbacked flowerpecker in the Nilgiris

If this bird has arrived in South India from the Himalayas it is a great victory for Tamil Nadu. My worry is that the only other sighting seems to have been by Badshah, who according to Salim Ali was somewhat unreliable. I hope Dr. S. T. will keep a careful watch about the presence/absence/mistaken identity of this beautiful avian.

Misguided Conservation ?

In Survey of the Environment 1998, published by THE HINDU, there is an article by Ranjit Daniels of the M.S. Swaminathan Foundation, under the heading: Bird Conundrum. The heading is appropriate as the thrust of the writing is not very clear. Under a sub-heading which I have replicated above, the author writes : "The danger of misguided conservation efforts is not to be ignored. Wetlands have a lot more to offer than what they offer in the form of bird sanctuaries. To a local human a wetland means a lot.

Discussions with local people in South India have indicated that they do place considerable value on aesthetics and ethics. They do feel that other forms of life also have 'a right to live' what about the disadvantages? Large colonies of birds fouling the water leading to eutrophication, trampling crops in the fields where they feed?"

This seems a strange argument against bird sanctuaries. Does the protection of birds in any area result in denying life to other creatures terrestrial or aquatic? Does the protection of birds lead to a lessening of biodiversity? If this is so then the author must provide more facts to support his case.

With regard to bird excrement (the invaluable guano) I thought that in many areas like Vedanthangal villagers protect birds for the valuable nitrogenous fertilizer they provide which adds to the fertility of the land. And surely bird excrement does not lead to eutrophication of our water bodies. This is the result of excessive use of chemical fertilizers and the draining of untreated sewage into the water. Ranjit Daniels knows this well-known fact.

Indian Journal of Biodiversity

In this decade biodiversity has become as popular a word as environment had become in the previous decade. This was to be expected as it is now recognised that a healthy environment depends on its undiminished biodiversity.

Volume No. 1, Number 1 and 2 (Jan-Dec 1997) of this Journal has been published. Dr. Kumar Ghorpade (well known

to the NLBW) has produced an excellent first issue, and with the impressive Advisory Board which he has set up, it is possible that the high standard will be maintained. The editing is exemplary, and the production equally commendable. A handy volume with a plastic see-through cover depicting symbolically various features of India's natural life. The loose leaf binding is an added advantage.

I will confine myself to a brief account of the article by Dr. A.K. Chakravathy who describes the bird life of the Western Ghats (Malnaad) in its ecological setting. His survey lists 313 species of birds in Chikmagalur and adjoining hill areas. Editor Ghorpade says in parenthesis: actually only 309 spp. The author explains that the eco-friendly activities of the people, in forests, agricultural areas, in coffee plantations, and in scrub lands results in the happy combination of high productivity from the land along with the retention of its rich natural life. An example for the rest of the country. Perhaps the reason for the comparatively sound ecological condition of Malnaad is its 42% of uncultivated and fallow land. But nuclear plants and dams may change the situation.

There will be two issues of this Journal every year. The price of Rs. 250 for its 204 pages is good investment for the serious naturalist. But Ghorpade must not overextend himself. He writes for Pitta and the NLBW, publishes (or intends to publish regularly *Colemania* and *Humea*) and now this new effort on Biodiversity. Perhaps there is need to reduce the area of operations in the interest of 'sustainable production', and worthwhile material.



Web of Death

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On an early winter day of October, 1996, I had gone to the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP), Mumbai on my usual Sunday morning sortie with a group of 10 interested Mumbaitees. I decided to take the short trail that winds through an undulating terrain terminating at the Kanheri caves. The animal life en route is plentiful owing to a perennial stream which feeds the adjoining forest comprising *Tectona grandis*, *Adina cordilolia*, *Salmalia malabarica*, *Saraca indica*, *Dalbergia latilolia*, *Garuga pinnata*, *Butea monosperma*, *Sterculia urens* and *Albizia lebbek*. Not only birds but larger animals like the barking deer *Muntiacus muntjak*, common langur *Presbytis entellus*, bonnet Macaque *Macaca radiata*, rhesus Macaque *Macaca mulatta*, common mongoose *Herpestes edwardsi* and the ever-elusive leopard *Panthera pardus* have been a common sight. In fact, my best sighting of the leopard has been on this stretch.

With the advent of monsoon each year, the forest canopy gets engulfed in innumerable webs of the giant wood spider *Nephila maculata*, the largest orb weaving spider in India [K. Vijayalakshmi & Preston Ahimaz, **Spiders: An Introduction**

(1993)]. These massive arachnids act as efficient pest controllers during the monsoon season, keeping a check on the ever-bloating insect population. Looking at these consummate hunters at work, one can't stop sympathizing with the insect community.

We hardly covered some distance when we found ourselves amidst a mixed hunting party consisting of the red breasted flycatcher *Muscicapa parva*, brown flycatcher *Muscicapa latirostris*, blacknaped blue flycatcher *Hypothymis azurea*, and paradise flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*. I was observing a red breasted flycatcher when a rustle of leaves on the adjacent branch diverted my attention. My eyes caught sight of a vigorously vibrating web of the giant wood spider. The disturbance seemed to have been caused by a huge insect. But surprisingly the elephantine female was lying undisturbed at the core of the web (normally, it takes a fraction of a second for the spider to zero down on the intruder). However, the inactivity on the part of the spider led me to survey the situation further. Meanwhile, I saw a blacknaped blue flycatcher not even a meter away from the spider. I

guessed that the flycatcher would have reached the trapped insect before the spider and the sheer size and weight difference between the two discouraged the eight-legged host to confront it.

I focused my binoculars on the flycatcher to monitor its action. No sooner did I do so, I was convinced of some anomaly about the entire episode. I was witnessing one of the most extraordinary sights of my wildlife career which spans more than 12 years. The former interpretation about the situation was drastically wrong. It wasn't the spider which was being threatened by the bird, but on the contrary, a bird [9-14 gm. in weight (Ali & Ripley (1972), Handbook of the Birds of India & Pakistan, Vol.7, pg. 225)] several times heavier than the spider was helplessly stuck in the web. It was utterly exhausted as all its attempts to free itself proved futile.

I had never seen a bird in such a precarious state. The left wing of the flycatcher was entangled in one of the main spokes of the web. I was initially tempted to free the bird but eventually decided against it as it would have meant intervening in a purely natural game played every day in the forest. I have read about the bird eating spiders of the equatorial forests of South America but am not sure whether

birds appear on the menu of the giant wood spiders in India. Nevertheless, the fate of the bird was sealed as it had lost the energy to relieve itself from the clasp of a slow but sure death. Rightly so, I was reminded of the law of nature - "Survival of the fittest"; he who cannot fend for himself, doesn't have the right to live.

Since years, I have witnessed the dazzled look on the faces of nature enthusiasts on hearing about the strength of the web of the giant wood spider - it is said to be 9-10 times stronger than an equivalent steel fiber. I have observed hordes of insects of assorted sizes hanging helplessly from these 'places of no return' but could never visualize, how a web could withstand the weight of a bird as large as a flycatcher. I waited at the spot for 45 minutes, but had to eventually part due to inclement weather, leaving nature to take its course.

I have been wondering since this accidental observation, whether ornithologists should reconsider spiders, if not as one of the predators then at least as a factor which can influence the population of the smaller tree dwelling bird species. I would be happy to receive some information on such occurrences in other parts of our country.



Reflections on Mumbai and Hingolghadh

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I received the latest Newsletter for Birdwatchers just prior to leaving for Hingolghadh. The cover photograph of the male purple sunbird by Sridhar was perhaps the most beautiful I have ever seen of this vivacious and fortunately widespread and still common bird. The next time I visit Bangalore, I must ask Sridhar to show me his obviously splendid collection. Actually, I would not be too sure if the bird in question was looking for a nesting site; most likely it was probing for spiders or whatever, the creator(s) of that mass of web was, and to carry away strands of cobweb for construction of its nest. Be what may, here is a most lovely photograph of a rather difficult model - part of the beauty of this bird is the movement resulting in electric changes in colours as light is reflected off it at different angles.

Incidentally, I was in Gandhinagar on my way back on 9th and 10th August from Mumbai. At the BNHS I had a look at specimens of sunbirds and what struck me was the similarity of the purple-rumped sunbird and the small sunbird males - the size difference of course is there, but sizes in the field are never reliable unless seen together for comparison, and how on earth does one tell the females of all the sunbird species apart? Of course the female Loten's has this

disproportionately large bill but that poses another problem in another area - can a birdwatcher tell for sure that the bird in question on top of a tall tree is a little spider hunter and not a female Loten's sunbird? Examining the sunbird specimen, I was struck by male purple-rumped sunbirds having longer bills than the females, an observation checked against measurements given in the Handbook. Here then is another problem for a future Ph.D. thesis. It was a charming finale to my Mumbai sojourn to be drinking evening tea after going over the stuffed specimens to have a lively pair of purple rumped sunbirds flitting about potted plants on their little terrace overlooking crowded houses at Gowalia Tank with a backdrop of huge skyscrapers. It just shows how, in the densest of urban settings birds come, provided some plants exist.

Before concluding, I would like to say how very much I enjoyed Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh's account of his holiday in Kangra. You might like to share Baljit's delightfully written piece on natural regeneration in the January '98 Awareness. It is a very bird populated write up. Incidentally Baljit's "mousebirds" were streaked laughing thrushes - one of those rather unimaginative names - little or small laughing thrush would be better.

On Droughts, Ducks and Frog Awooping

Hingolghadh atop a 1000' ASL hill commands an impressive view over the heartland of the Saurashtra peninsula of Gujarat State. Great, almost persistent, winds blow throughout the year and if there is any location which experiences the S.W. monsoon and the diametrically opposite N.E. monsoon, it is this volcanic outcrop thrust through a base of limestone. It is only when the switch takes place in the prevailing winds that there are lulls. These powerful winds have impressed a very distinctive character on the vegetation and the birds of Hingolghadh - winds and the highly seasonal erratic rainfall. It is a revelation and a continual source of delight to watch the blue rock pigeons of Hingolghadh, one is almost tempted to assign a subspecific identity to this flock as one watches the tremendous dexterity of flight - entire flock takes off from time to time, circles the castle, glides against the wind to swoop with a power dive with the wind, and after a quick turn to soar up high into the sky and with a great swoosh, to land on the ledges and cornices to once again relapse into fluttering and cooing, typical of pigeons the world over. The burst into the void and a swish around the ramparts ever so frequently interrupting the normal pigeon goings on - a passage of a vulture, the turn of a raptor or the slightest excuse afforded by a sudden extra gust of wind is enough to make them revel in the power flight imparted to them by the restless air! Even the flock of roseringed parakeets periodically join the pigeons in these spectacular displays of aerial virtuosity; only in their case the normally loquacious chatter rises to histrionic shrieks. Watching both these birds demonstrates the capacity of the elements to add vibrancy to animals.

The resident flock of house swifts are continually hovering, gliding, soaring or collecting in flocks of merrily twittering birds, several times during the day to circle up in tightly packed swarms to rise high up to meet the cloud vapours racing ahead of the gales. It is when the clouds are low that several Alpine swifts - larger than the house swifts, with their scythe-shaped wings and white throats and bellies - swoop in at great speeds to circle the castle several times before disappearing with equal suddenness perhaps to circle the rocks and cliffs of distant Mt. Girnar or Mt. Abu! Another large swift which arrives effortlessly from out of the clouds is the large swift, very like the house swifts but larger and displaying remarkable ease as it rises against the gusts or circles the ramparts. What magnificent adaptations! Pigeon or swift, a breathtaking capacity imparted by the free play of elements on organic functions! Fine-tuning of eye, and nervous reflexes to control the feathers of wing or tail, above all, the watchful eye of an eagle or a breathtaking stoop of a laggar falcon to pick off any with the slightest of lapse, the interplay of the wind, the vision, the muscles and the twist of feathers provides the story of evolution watched from a

remarkable vantage point. Alas! so few have the time to stand and admire the drama of life.

The greatest miracle, however, is the sudden transformation which takes place with the first rains. This year, the rains had eluded us and except for the great winds carrying low clouds, the entire month of July had gone without a drop of rain, and when I reached Hingolghadh on 27th July for my annual monsoon sojourn, there was a palpable anxiety among the people - even the wind-battered xerophytic trees showed signs of preparing for a long and terrible drought. The amazing adaptability and tenacity of life were being enacted before my eyes. On 29th July 1998, the wind dropped and blew in fitful gusts in different directions, the clouds billowed up into thunderheads and in the late afternoon there were fierce jabs of lightning, peals of thunder, and with a sudden blast of wind, rain came down in sheets. As night fell, and the storm moved on, 1 inch of blessed water had fallen. The cool, moist night came alive to the orchestra of millions of frogs strumming away beside the water filled depressions. Where did they appear from so suddenly?

Next morning the clouds raced close to the ground and deposited fine droplets on the branches of trees, and the surfaces of rocks. Suddenly, I heard subdued creakings from among the clouds and looking up I saw a pair of nukta circling the fort, their bulky bodies given a lift by the winds and the moisture inducing an urgency to find some ledge or cavity to lay eggs. From where did these ducks suddenly arrive? On a small reservoir at the foot of the hill, a pair of spotbill ducks had also arrived! Ducks and drought seem so far apart that the sudden appearance of these waterbirds was amazing. That afternoon another storm deposited 1 inch 20 cents, sending the frogs into a frenzy. On 31st July, the drenched countryside swathed in mists and cool moist winds, was a far cry from the arid landscape I had come to a couple of days earlier, and to reinforce the miracle, the afternoon storm rose into a violence that was breathtaking. By the time the rain had subsided into a gentle drizzle, 4 inches 80 cents had fallen. Next morning the fitful sun shimmered off water reservoirs in every direction. Birds which had been subdued and showed very tentative interest in nesting were now in full throat and uncompleted nests were given finishing touches, and before my unbelieving eyes, hitherto empty nests had brooding hens - redvented bulbus, Franklin's wren warblers, ashy wren warblers, marshal's loras, ring and little brown doves all were incubating! The ducks - nukta and spotbills very much in possession of the land - the pigeons and parakeets, the swifts continuing their aerial displays above an avian population far too busily engaged in the urgency of procreating during the only too brief season, to notice the overhead goings on. It is in this supreme fine-tuning for survival that human role must be enacted as a protector or a destroyer. This is the disturbing question only we can answer individually and collectively.



Birding at Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary

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We went for a short trip to Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary from December 12 to 13, 1997. Thattekkad is situated in Idukki district of Kerala. The main habitat consists of evergreen, semi-evergreen and deciduous forests, teak and mahogany plantations, grasslands and a riverine belt. The Sanctuary is the catchment area of Boothathankett Dam.

Some of the more interesting birds are mentioned in this list.

1. Red spurfowl - *Gallus spadicea*. Red spurfowl were commoner than grey jungle fowl. Large flocks were observed regularly on the forest track.
2. Pigmy woodpecker - *Dendrocopos nanus*. This small woodpecker was seen in teak plantations and semi-evergreen patches. Perhaps one of the most abundant woodpeckers of the Sanctuary.
3. Rufous woodpecker - *Celeus brachyurus*. An active pair was regularly observed in semi-evergreen forest and in teak plantations. This bird has the strange habit of raising its family in the live nest of red-ants.
4. Little scalybellied woodpecker - *Picus xanthopygaeus*. A pair was observed near the riverine belt.
5. Heartspotted woodpecker - *Hemicircus canente*. 4-5 active pairs observed in the Sanctuary. The pairs flew one by one, from one tree to another with sweet turr...ri...ri...twir...ri...ri...ri calls.
6. Crimsonthroated barbet - *Megalaima rubricapilla*. Quite common at Thattekkad. It was heard calling throughout the day. Two or three birds were observed with the hunting party of black-headed oriole, racket-tailed drongo, common iora, rubythroated bulbul and grey tit.
7. Crimson breasted barbet - *Megalaima haemacephala*. A single bird was observed at the entrance of the Sanctuary.
8. Broadbilled roller - *Eurystomus orientalis*. This rare and threatened species was observed regularly in teak plantations and the evergreen forest region of the Sanctuary.
9. Storkbilled kingfisher - *Pelargopsis capensis*. This large kingfisher was mainly seen in the lake area.
10. Bluebearded bee-eater - *Nyctornis athertoni*. This forest bee-eater was regularly observed in semi-evergreen and riverine forest patches.
11. Indian bay banded cuckoo - *Cacomantis sonneratii*. One of the commoner cuckoo species in the sanctuary. Its pee-pee-pee-pee...pee-pee-pee-pee call was heard throughout the day.
12. Indian edible-nest swiftlet - *Collocalia unicolor*. Large flocks were observed. In the evening the birds gathered together and roamed over the forest till dusk.
13. Scops owl - *Otus scops*. The 'ukroo...ukroo...ukroo' call of this owl was heard in the evening and echoed in the Sanctuary throughout the moonlit night.
14. Forest eagleowl - *Bubo nipalensis*. On our return trip to dormitory at 6.30 p.m. we heard the loud call of forest eagle owl from the riverine belt, and we heard it calling throughout the night.
15. Brown fish owl - *Ketupa zeylonensis*. One bird near a rivulet came out of its daytime roost, and soon a group of small birds mobbed it. It flew away after a while. Heard at night.
16. Mottled wood owl - *Strix ocellata*. Mostly heard at night.
17. Brown hawk owl - *Ninox scutulata*. A single bird was seen near the dormitory at dusk. Its long woo...oo...woo...oo...woo...woo...oo was heard throughout the moonlit night.
18. Greateared nightjar - *Eurostopodus macrotis*. A single bird was seen hawking near the forest track at 6.35 p.m. The long whistling call was also heard throughout the night.
19. Longtailed nightjar - *Caprimulgus atripennis*. At 6 p.m. while returning with the day's "catch", a nightjar flew up from the undergrowth and another bird chased it in the manner of a blue rock pigeon. The birds were seen in this presumed display flight and often perched very nearby. There were 4 birds at least, and using a powerful torch we could see their jewel like glowing eyes. They disappeared frequently in the undergrowth, and their loud 'chongr..chongr..chongr' calls were heard through the night.
20. Spotted dove - *Streptopelia chinensis*. Mostly observed in the teak plantations.
21. Greyfronted green pigeon - *Treron pompadora*. Long whistling call often heard in the evergreen patches. Groups of 4-5 birds seen resting on trees near the forest path.
22. Jerdon's imperial pigeon - *Ducula badia*. 3-4 birds regularly observed in the semi-evergreen forests.
23. Indian river tern - *Sterna aurantia*. Two seen flying very fast and calling at a high pitch. Also seen in the bays, but only two at a time.
24. Whiskered tern - *Chlidonias hybridus*. About 50 seen flying over the lake, and perching on electric cables across the waterbody at the ferry.
25. Crested serpent eagle - *Spilornis cheela*. Most abundant raptor of the sanctuary. 5-6 individuals were observed in different habitats of the Sanctuary.
26. Crested goshawk - *Accipiter trivirgatus*. A solitary female bird was observed in the evergreen forest. The bird was perching on a bare branch of a medium sized tree near the forest track.

27. Rufousbellied eagle - *Hieraaetus kienerii*. A single bird was seen in the evergreen patch near the forest stream. On another occasion the bird was seen soaring over the dense canopy.

28. Crested hawk eagle - *Spizaetus cirrhatu*s. A crested hawk eagle was seen flying over the dense evergreen forest, and on another occasion a single bird was seen on a leafy branch of a tall tree making loud kick.kick.kickee calls.

29. Oriental darter - *Anhinga melanogaster*. About six seen in a roost on a partially submerged tree. Almost whitenecked immatures also seen. One bird managed to catch a large fish without leaving its perch.

30. Large cormorant - *Phalacrocorax carbo*. A single bird observed near the darter roost.

31. Blacknaped oriole - *Oriolus chinensis*. All three orioles, blackheaded, golden and blacknaped observed. On 13th morning, a close pack of 6 orioles seen feeding in a teak plantation besides the reservoir of which two were blacknaped species. Once again two male birds were observed in an evergreen patch near a forest stream.

32. Pied flycatcher shrike - *Hemipus picatus*. Seen in teak plantations, deciduous and semi-evergreen forest.

33. Haircrested drongo - *Dicrurus hottentottus*. Seen in all our birding sessions. 7 or more birds were observed in teak plantations, semi-evergreen and deciduous forest areas. Perhaps one of the most abundant species of the Sanctuary.

34. Brown flycatcher - *Muscicapa davurica*. This flycatcher was regularly sighted in the teak plantations and semi-evergreen forest areas.

35. Rufoustailed flycatcher - *Muscicapa ruficauda*. Mostly observed in the evergreen patches near the forest stream.

36. Brownbreasted flycatcher - *Muscicapa muttui*. Seen in all the birding sessions. This migrant was quite common at Thattekkad Sanctuary.

37. Bluethroated flycatcher - *Cyornis rubeculoides*. Commonly seen especially in the undergrowth of teak plantations. Melodious calls before roosting at dusk.

38. Blue chat - *Luscinia brunnea*. Heard calling mainly early morning and late evening. Occasionally the call was also heard at midday. A male bird was seen in reed thickets.

39. Whitethroated ground thrush - *Zoothera citrina*. Seen very frequently. On 13th morning, four individuals observed. Perhaps a common species of the Sanctuary.

40. Blacknaped flycatcher - *Hypothymis azurea*. Most abundant flycatcher of the Thattekkad bird Sanctuary. 4-5 pairs regularly observed in degraded forest areas as well as in evergreen patches.



41. Shama - *Copsychus malabaricus*. Heard calling early morning and late evening. A male bird was seen in the bamboo thickets.

42. Greyheaded bulbul - *Pycnonotus priocephalus*. Observed groups of 3 or 4 in semi and evergreen forest areas of the Sanctuary. Greyheaded bulbuls were also observed with mixed hunting parties of malabar grey hornbill, blackheaded babbler, quaker babbler, blackheaded oriole, greenish leaf warbler, racket-tailed drongo, blacknaped oriole, blacknaped blue flycatcher, velvet fronted nuthatch, rubythroated bulbul, yellowbrowed bulbul, bay banded cuckoo and fairy bluebird.

43. Coorg wren warbler - *Prinia hodgsonii*. Small groups of 4-5 birds were regularly observed in the degraded forests and teak plantations.

44. Blyth's reed warbler - *Acrocephalus stentoreus*. Quite common at Thattekkad Sanctuary.

45. Booted warbler - *Hippolais caligata*. A single bird was sighted in the semi-evergreen forest.

46. Largebilled leaf warbler - *Phylloscopus magnirostris*. Quite common. Its long and melodious 'swee-tee...swee-tee' call heard throughout the jungle.

47. Spotted babbler - *Pellorneum ruficeps*. Its monotonous 'pretty sweet' call heard throughout the day. Group of 4-5 birds observed in the reed thickets near the forest streams. Melodious breeding calls heard at midday.

48. Slatyheaded scimitar babbler - *Pomatorhinus horsfieldii*. Mostly heard in the evergreen forest.

49. Blackheaded babbler - *Rhopocichia atriceps*. Seen frequently in the reed thickets and undergrowth of the semi-evergreen forests. Like the haircrested drongo an abundant species.

50. Quaker babbler - *Alcippe poiaicephala*. Quaker babblers were regularly observed with the mixed hunting parties of rubythroated bulbul, yellowbrowed bulbul, racket-tailed drongo, bronzed drongo, fairy bluebird, ashy drongo and gold fronted chloropsis. Active groups of 4-5 birds were seen in semi-evergreen and deciduous forest.

51. Loten's sunbird - *Nectarinia lotenia*. One nest with an egg was found near a forest stream. The female was incubating.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the young birdwatcher, Eldhose K.V., for sharing his knowledge about the Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary. We also express our thanks to him for field support.

References :

1. Birds of Kerala - Dr. Salim Ali.
2. Kerala's Birds - Prof. K.K. Neelankantan.



Some Observations of a bird enthusiast

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I read with great interest the 'Commentary by a bird watching Naturalist' - 2 by Dr. Kumar Ghorpade in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers, Vol.38 No.3. What is stated by the author is of course very true and should be borne in mind by all those who watch or study birds and their behaviour. The stress laid on research by Dr. Ghorpade is all important, but a lot depends on the extent of a watcher's enquiring mind. If practical aspects of the study of birds in the field are considered, there may be cases of some observations which may appear unusual but actually they may not be so. On the other hand something which may look ordinary or commonplace may turn out to be important or unrecorded in the science of ornithology. Thus in both cases research and reference to available literature is essential.

Reporting about an unusual occurrence in any particular area of a species or about what may appear as unusual behaviour is all right by itself, but if the observer does not back it up by proper references taking it for granted, it may in the end turn out to be an exercise in futility. To give an example of my own experience, a few years ago while on a visit to a proposed Sanctuary for the great Indian bustard - *Ardeotis nigriceps* - I saw some gull-billed terns - *Sterna/Gelochelidon nilotica* - some distance away from water quartering the grassland and diving down into the grass to pick up insects. Up to that time my impression was that this tern only lived near water, particularly on the seacoast and in tidal creeks, and fed in that habitat in its usual manner. On coming back home I looked up the habitats of the species in Volume 3 of Ali and Ripley's Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan wherein it is stated : 'Sometimes hawks flying insects over cultivation and stubbles in company with whiskered terns, and dips in low flight to scoop up a caterpillar or grasshopper from off ground-crops like gram or groundnut.'

There is another example of what appears to be an unusual behaviour of one more species, but in actual fact it is normal and peculiar to it. One usually expects to come across the curlew - *Numenius arquata* - on a marsh or on tidal creeks etc. But this bird is at times met with on absolutely dry ground quite far away from water and feeding on open wasteland. The Handbook Volume 2 says : 'In early part of season sometimes found miles inland from the seacoast feeding on edges of jheels or open grassy plains still damp and soft after the monsoon.' Stuart - Baker in Volume 6 of the Fauna of British India series makes no mention of this habit. I have come across the curlew singly or in twos and threes merrily walking about on absolutely dry, hard ground and feeding on it. At times in winter when at a great distance one suspects it, through the naked eye, to be the houbara bustard - *Chlamydotis undulata* - as the size of the former appears similar.

As Dr. Ghorpade so rightly mentions the gaps and missing links in our knowledge of the Indian birdlife it is essential to note any aspects observed in the field. Any unusual behaviour or occurrences noticed for which references are not readily available should always be reported to an expert or sent for publication to any one of the ornithological institutions. So few of our birds have been studied in detail that an obvious void in the science of Indian ornithology remains which needs to be filled up. Certain behavioural aspects of even our common birds have somehow escaped notice.

To give an example of what is stated above, the white-breasted kingfisher - *Halcyon smyrnensis* - is a very common bird having a wide distribution in our subcontinent. Yet its nuptial display has apparently not been noticed, or at least it has not been mentioned in any of the references available to me. During the breeding season the male sits on a prominent high perch and gives his commonly heard high pitched call. He all of a sudden flies up, starts flying with slow, deliberate strokes of the wings uttering a kik-kik-kik or klick-click-etc., calls in slow cadence and suddenly comes down to perch on another site. The Handbook Volume 4 (Ali & Ripley) states : 'Pair-formation, behaviour and courtship display not properly studied, but the distinctive wing pattern evidently plays an important part in the proceedings.' In the Birds of Pakistan, Volume 1, (Roberts) makes no mention of this flight and display and even Dharmakumarsinhji (The Birds of Saurashtra) is silent on this aspect of behaviour of the white-breasted kingfisher.

Now I come to the subject of my note in the Journal of Bombay Natural History Society (Vol.92:1:123) referred to by Dr. Ghorpade. It concerns with what I feel is the brown shrike - *Lanius cristatus* - which has been regularly visiting the grounds of my house here in Bhuj. I give this information here for two purposes. Firstly for the benefit of those readers of the Newsletter who may not have access to the J.B.N.H.S. and secondly to once again prove my point that there can be no hard and fast rule for the occurrence of any particular bird in a given area. In other words, the pattern of occurrences of species can vary according to the favourable or unfavourable factors governing the ecosystem. Then there is also the likelihood that in one or two surveys a particular bird could easily be missed. Thus so far as the occurrence of the brown shrike in Kutch is concerned, Capt. C.D. Lester mentions in his book on the birds of Kutch (1904) that the brown shrike is a winter visitor. While mentioning the status and distribution of the mainly passage migrant rufous shrike - *Lanius collurio phoenicuroides* - Salim Ali (The Birds of Kutch 1945) remarks : 'Lester obviously meant this form when he wrote of the brown shrike. The latter is a bird of well-wooded tracts and does not occur in Kutch or elsewhere in desert or semi-desert country.' After describing the bird's plumage and so on Lester says :

'The brown shrike is found in almost every part of the plains of India during the cold weather, frequenting gardens, hedgerows, etc., Lester himself updated a former work on the birds of Kutch by one Hugh Palin (1878) in accordance with Oates and Blanford's 'The Fauna of British India (Birds)'.

The shrike I have been observing keeps to bushes, low fruit trees, thickets of *Prosopis juliflora* and in hedges. It is usually vocal late in the evening or at dusk, but it at times calls in the morning too and during the day when alarmed. Unlike other shrike species met with in this region this bird sits on an inner unexposed twig or branch of the vegetation and launches sallies at its prey from there. It is very rarely that it perches at an exposed point or in the outer foliage but it at once dives into the inner recesses of a bush or shrub on suspicion of danger or on the close approach of a human being.

The plumage etc. of the shrike concerned fits the description in the reference books except the supercilium which I am not sure about. In any case the identity of this bird could be established if it can be collected or a good coloured photograph of it could be taken. Except in such cases when one is absolutely certain it is not advisable to jump to conclusions so far as identifying birds in the field is concerned. This used to be the principle of Dr. Salim Ali which he himself used to strictly follow all through his long career in the field. With his vast knowledge and the experience he gained during a long period of study of aves he could at once pinpoint the identity of a bird in the field. Yet when it came to deciding the identity of a rare bird he would not definitely commit himself. A typical example of this trait of SA can be found in Volume 71, No.3 of the Jour. Bom. Nat. Hist. Society. I cannot do better than to quote him here :

'On visits to the Great Rann of Kutch in April 1956, April 1957, March 1960 and again as recently as January 1974, I

observed rather distant flocks of a puzzling gull which it struck me at the time could, by all the rules of the game, be no other than the little gull, *Larus minutus* Pallas. I did not publish this earlier in view of the extreme paucity of records of this species in the Indian subcontinent (a single specimen from Ladakh, and a possible sighting in Bombay Harbour - Indian Handbook 3 : 37), and lack of positive conviction on my own part. However, on the latest visit to the Rann (23/24 January 1974) I was able to watch a fairly large flock sufficiently closely to support my earlier conjecture, though confirmation must still await a specimen.' Subsequently, in December 1998, we (members, Pelican Nature Club, Kutch) came across a gull on Sinai dam (Kandla Port environs) which could definitely be identified as *Larus minutus*.

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* Footnote

For the information of those unfamiliar with English names, Stuart-Baker is a typical British 'double-barrelled' surname which cannot be split into Stuart & Baker. So alphabetically it would follow surnames beginning with an 'R' and not 'A'.



Correspondence between Sunbirds and *Leonotis* (Lamiaceae)

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Sunbirds belonging to the Family Nectarinidae are widely distributed in warmer parts of the old world with largest concentration in tropical Africa. Of the different genera in this family, *Nectarinia* is the largest group and widely found in the tropical world. They feed on insects and floral nectar of different plant species. In this paper, the usage of sunbirds refers to *Neclarinia* only unless otherwise specified.

The sunbird flowers exhibit certain characters such as protection against damage that might be done by a bird probing into the floral chamber with its sharp-pointed bill,

refusal of the welcome mat to the unbidden guests, hexose-rich nectar, etc. Its flowers are nectariterous (hexose-rich; 8 µl/flower), bilabiate, orange-scarlet in colour and corolla tubular. The corolla is covered with coloured hairs and forms a thick fringe along the edge of the upper lip. The lower lip is three-lobed and glabrous; its lobes fully expand when the flower is open but withers within an hour or two. The tubular portion of the corolla contains nectar. The sex organs are covered by the hooded upper lip. These floral characters facilitate easy access to the floral reward for probing sunbirds.

The sunbirds, namely, *Nectarinia asiatica* and *N. zeylonica* forage on *L. nepetaefolia* in and around the foothills of Turimella near Giddalur, Prakasam District, Andhra Pradesh. They employ legitimate and illegitimate approaches for exploiting floral nectar. In the former approach, they probe the flowers from below and in so doing the bill of the sunbirds surely contacts with the stigma and anthers as it penetrates into the floral tube for nectar; in effect it results in pollination. In the latter approach, the sunbirds slit or depress the middle portion of the corolla from above with their bill bypassing the pollination apparatus without damaging the essential floral parts; it does not effect pollination. Such a dual foraging behaviour exhibited by sunbirds for sucking the floral nectar does not ensure reproductive success to 100% in *L. nepetaefolia*. However, the plant species could yield 100% fruit and seed set since it is self-compatible and also self-pollinating. Sunbirds use flowering *Leonotis* populations as feeding stations as long as they are in flowering. Therefore, *Leonotis* exhibits sunbird-pollination syndrome and the sunbirds too show fidelity to its flowers and thereby suggesting that there is a harmonious relationship between both partners.

Previous published records show that sunbirds occur in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. Likewise, *L. nepetaefolia* was reportedly available aplenty along roadsides, other disturbed and undisturbed areas. My field studies in this locality show that *L. nepetaefolia* has small populations and is on the verge of disappearance. Further, sunbirds are never found foraging on *Leonotis*. Similarly, sunbirds have never foraged on *Helicteres isora*, another sunbird-pollinated plant

species in tropical latitudes. From these observations, it is clear that the decline in the populations of *L. nepetaefolia* is associated with the absence of sunbirds in the area.

L. nepetaefolia in Africa is also shown to be pollinated by sunbirds representing *Nectarinia* and *Anthreptes* genera. There, these birds exhibit territorial behaviour to strike intruder pressure as long as this plant species is in intense flowering (Frost and Frost 1980). In case of other species of *Leonotis* also, sunbirds have been shown to be the pollinators by Vos *et.al.* (1994) and this suggests that there is a close correspondence between sunbirds and the genus *Leonotis* for mutualistic benefits. In conclusion, where one finds *Leonotis* one will find sunbirds, or vice-versa in the old world. *Leonotis* is also found in the Neotropics where it is primarily foraged and pollinated by humming birds *sensu* Cruden (1976).

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Eight species of vultures are reported from the Indian subcontinent and till recent years none of them were supposed to be in any danger. Actually, in north India, the Indian white-backed (*Gyps bengalensis*) and long-billed (*Gyps indicus*) vultures were abundant. Only the king or black vulture *Sarcogyps calvus* was considered to be somewhat rarer. When I first read in the book *Birds to Watch-2: The World List of Threatened Birds*, published by BirdLife International, that both the Indian white-backed (or white-rumped vulture as it is now known) and the long-billed vultures are included in the 'Near Threatened' list, I protested to Dr. Nigel Collar, the first author of this book, that both these species are over-abundant in north India and hence their inclusion in the Near Threatened list is a mistake. Nigel told me that he has included these vultures on the basis of their massive decline in other countries of their distribution e.g. China, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Looking at our dirty cities and cadaverous cows, I could not imagine that vultures will ever have a problem in

Decline of vultures in India

ASAD R. RAHMANI, Director, Bombay Natural History Society

India in getting food and shelter. Sadly, within four years of publication of *Birds to Watch-2*, prophesies of this book have become real. I have received very alarming news that vultures are declining very rapidly all over north India (their main distribution range in India). There have been many news items in local newspapers about carcasses left uneaten due to non-availability of vultures. Carcasses which used to be finished within hours now rot for days. In many areas only the village pie dogs are left to finish them.

During my bird study trips, I try to note all the species seen, especially the larger and rarer ones but I never gave attention to vultures (except the king vulture) because they were always abundant and not worth wasting time to count. I think, it was a big mistake. In these troubled times when species are declining at a fast rate, ornithologists should note each species and develop his/her own data base, because we never know which species will suddenly decline. If we have some data base then we may be able to compare and quantify. Fortunately, my colleague Dr. Vibhu Prakash, Principal

Scientist of the BNHS has such data on vultures in Keoladeo National Park at Bharatpur which will give an idea of the massive decline of vulture population.

During the mid-1980s Dr. Vibhu conducted detailed studies on all birds of prey, including vultures, in Keoladeo, for his Ph.D. programme. It was part of a ten-year study on the ecology of the Park, supervised by Dr. Salim Ali and Dr. V.S. Vijayan. He estimated about 350 nests of Indian white-backed vultures inside the Park. Now Dr. Vibhu has his own project on raptors in Bharatpur and other places. This year (1998) he found only 25 nests in the Park - a decline of more than 90%.

Without proper study it is difficult to find out the main reason(s) for the decline of vultures. I do not think, habitat destruction or hunting could be the reason. The increasing

number of scrub cattle also makes sure that there is no scarcity of food. So, what could be the culprit? My guess is that perhaps new pesticides could be the reason for killing vultures. There are some reports of vultures dying after eating a carcass. I have seen up to 30 dead vultures around a cow carcass in Lakshmipur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh about ten years ago. But even this could not explain such a massive decline. I do not know whether this decline is all over India or in certain pockets only.

With this article I want to alert other ornithologists to keep a watch on vulture populations and let me know if they have seen any decline in their areas. As in South Africa, we also have to establish a Vulture Study Group which can closely monitor vulture populations and suggest effective measures to save these wonderful natural cleaners of our environment.



Nesting of the Golden Backed Woodpecker

K.B. SANJAYAN, T.C. XII/1082, Law College Road, Trivandrum 695 037

The Kerala golden backed woodpecker (*Dinopium benghalense*) is a common bird species found all over Kerala. Its characteristic high pitch call in flight is all too familiar even for toddlers. Recently I was fortunate to observe the nesting habits of a pair of Kerala golden backed woodpeckers. It was seen that from early March of 1998 a pair of woodpeckers were frequenting a large tree that stood in my dwelling place. They inspected a bird hole that had been in existence on the tree for a long time and had drawn my attention ever since I started residing here about five years ago. Common mynas had been making it a regular spot for building their nests, season after season.

The tree on which the nest was found is *Bridelia squamosa* (Mulluvenga in Malayalam) which is tall (about 75 feet in height). The hole is about 25 feet from the ground. The tree bears large sized oval leaves for most part of the year. Hence, thick shadow prevails underneath the tree. In March, it sheds its leaves and almost remains naked for a brief period of 10 days.

The tree stands on a residential plot with an extent of 8.08 acres. The plot has other trees as well like coral wood (*Adenanthera pavonina*), Indian coral tree (*Erythrina indica*), vatta (*Macaranga roxburghii*), jack tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) and coconut trees. The nesting tree was only 12 feet from the house. The adjoining plots also are similar and together form a large and densely wooded patch.

The two birds continued their inspection of the tree hole for 3 to 4 days. However it was noteworthy that the birds carried no nest building materials to refurbish the nest.

Among woodpeckers the sexes are distinguishable by the size of the red crest carried on their heads. Male birds have a

prominent crest while females have a less prominent and short one.

From 9th March, the birds were seen sitting in the nest for most of the time. It was then presumed that laying of eggs had already occurred.

On 10th March, the nest was physically inspected by making use of a ladder. Two tiny eggs were visible from outside, with the possibility for a third one lying obscured from sight. The eggs were white.

Mostly the female bird was sitting over the eggs. In the night one bird sat in the nest while the other one was resting on a coconut tree in an adjacent plot. During night the bird completely withdrew into the nest and did not project its head out.

The nesting pair were late in starting their day. Each morning, one bird perched on a nearby tree and uttered its first call - its usual long, high-pitched call. The time was 6.15 to 6.25 a.m. On hearing its pair's call, the bird in the nest came out and flew away. Then the other bird would enter the nest. During the day both birds sat over the eggs, in turn.

During the long duration of nearly 18 days of brooding, the woodpecker pair assiduously sat in the nest by taking turns. Many a time, a pair of jungle mynas were trying to engage them in combat, so as to occupy the nest. It led to duels in the air in which the woodpeckers always won. Once a crow pheasant was also hopping around in the branches around the nest menacingly.

The chattering of the chicks was first heard from the nest on 28th March. The birds were seen to be feeding soon after.

It is presumed that woodpecker chicks are precocious to a great degree. From the first day of hatching, both parents were seen making sorties to bring food for the nestlings.

Even after hatching, it was customary for one bird to sit in the nest along with the chicks in the night. As days went by the chattering of the chicks became louder.

Things took a dramatic turn on Sunday, 5th April when one of the chicks, impatient to leave the nest, fell to the ground attracting the attention of crows. A large flock of crows had assembled in the vicinity. We immediately spotted the hapless chick which had taken shelter underneath a bunch of coconut leaves. The bird was clearly visible with its distinctive golden yellow and black back and buffy white streaked with black underneath. The chick was just like the adult in appearance, as all the feathers had sprouted and no part of the body was bare. Perhaps the tail of the bird, which gives it the support required while hopping vertically upwards, alone had not grown.

By using the ladder, we tried to put it back in its nest. But it refused to occupy its nest. Left with no alternative, we decided to try out a novel method to save the chick.

We put the chick in a cage and tied the cage atop a long pole. The pole was then raised to the height of the nest and fixed. After about 15 minutes, the parent bird arrived with food in its beak. It fed the chick with its characteristic chattering. The parents continued to feed the chicks both in the cage and nest thereafter in the usual way. When it was dusk we decided to release the chick into the nest. The door of the cage was opened and the cage was kept close to the opening of the nest. The chick entered the nest. The cage was then lowered. But disappointing all of us, the chick once again came out of

the nest and started hopping vertically upwards. It reached the abrupt end of a branch where it rested. It was already dark. With a torch, we could see the chick in a resting posture. The time was 9.00 p.m.

Early next day, even before daybreak, we looked for the chick. But alas, it was missing. In the morning we searched the whole tree as well as the ground, but no sign of the chick was in evidence. Probably the chick must have fallen a victim to a jungle owlet in the night.

At about 2.00 p.m. on 6th April, the second chick was spotted on the ground. It was spotted by Rohit and Mohit. They immediately put the bird in the cage and the cage was raised to a height on the same tree. As usual the parents started feeding the chick. But now the parents no longer visited the nest, obviously due to the absence of any chick.

As we had already learned a lesson, we decided not to release the bird until it grew to some maturity. We kept the cage on the tree itself. Shri M. Ramesh of Warblers and Waders photographed the bird on 10th March 1998.

As days passed by the call of the chick was almost similar to its parent's. Still it was an incomplete call. The chick had also grown sizeably. By 11th April, the growth was remarkable. The tail was longer. It used to bite the wiremesh of the cage. So it was decided to release the bird.

The bird was released at 11 a.m. on 11th April 1998. It hopped on to the tree. Later it was joined by its parents and flew to the adjacent trees. The flight of the chick was longer and firmer. After sometime, it disappeared from sight. But the incomplete call of the chick could be heard from a distance for several days.



ABSTRACT

STUDIES ON WHITE-WINGED WOOD DUCK. (*Cairina scutulata*). H.S.A. YAHYA and RASHID RAZA, Centre of Wildlife & Ornithology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202 002

A study was conducted from 1993 to 1996 to gain information on the status and habitat of the WWD. Playback of their tape recorded calls in the wild resulted in the birds responding. On 07.03.93 at 0510 two calls were heard but the birds were not seen. At 0520 as a result of playback a female appeared at 0521 and perched on a tree. The playback continued till 0534. "The birds were very restless and responded to the playback calls with quivering, piping and plaintive sounds". There are captive aviaries of these birds in Namdang and Borboby in Assam, where presumably the calls

of these birds are recorded. The authors say they were able to flush WWD's on 4 occasions by means of the playback calls. But they warn that "The tape calls should not be publicised or excessively used so that the birds become used to or are trapped by poachers".

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CORRESPONDENCE

THE MISSION OF OUR NEWSLETTER. J.L. SINGH, D3/1, RITES Flats, Ashok Vihar (Phase III), Delhi 110 052

Between October 97 and March 98, I had occasion to work in Jamaica. I used the opportunity and examined the island's bird-life in all the spare time that I had. I even enrolled as a member of the local Bird Club, called Gosse Bird Club, named after Mr. Phillip Henry Gosse, an Englishman who published the first books devoted to Jamaican birds at the end of the last century.

The Gosse Bird Club is something of a cross between the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India and the BNHS. Of course, unlike the latter, which covers the entire gamut of natural history, the Gosse Bird Club covers only birds. I was impressed to find that the Club has a mission statement and a set of strategic objectives. If we in the Birdwatcher's Field Club of India do not have such a mission statement or any objectives, perhaps we should formulate them and then ensure that we work towards them. This will give us all a sense of direction and we will pull in the same direction. Of course, we could first solicit member's views on the need of having such statements and objectives.

If the consensus is positive, I suggest the following which you may consider for adoption, with modifications if required:

Mission Statement

The Birdwatchers Field Club of India aims to collate, advance and spread the knowledge and conservation of birds and their habitats, primarily in India. This will be achieved through field observations, field projects, ornithological education and advocacy.

Strategic Objectives

To promote the observation and study of birds and their habitats in the field.

To collate, store and disseminate information on birds and their habitats.

To develop in the public at large and its own members in particular, expertise and resources needed for the study and conservation of birds and their habitats.

To encourage and participate in field programmes for the conservation of birds and management of bird sanctuaries and other conservation areas.

To develop and set conservation goals and standards.

To influence decision makers on matters affecting birds and their conservation.

To build public awareness.

To liaise with similar organisations in India and abroad.

I hope you will consider my suggestion. I also enclose a small write-up on my birding experiences in Jamaica, which you may consider for publication in the Newsletter.



NO SMALL GREEN BARBETS IN CORBETT. PROF. H.S.A YAHYA, Chairman, Centre of Wildlife & Ornithology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202 002

This is just to comment on the mention of possible sighting of small green barbet *M. viridis* given in your Editorial note and checklist of birds seen in Corbett National Park [NLBW - Vol.38 (3)]. There is no possibility of *M. viridis* occurring in the Corbett Tiger Reserve as its most extended limit is upto Narmada River. Two common species usually seen in Corbett are lineated barbet *M. lineata* and blue-throated barbet *M. asiatica*. Though the crimsonbreasted barbet is also seen at times at peripheral forest areas, there is no chance of *M. viridis* to be sighted in North India. This barbet is endemic to peninsular India.



THANE KA TAL - A WETLAND OF INTERNATIONAL IMPORTANCE. J.K. TIWARI, Asst. Manager, Wildlife & Environment Nature Conservation Centre, Sanghi Cements, Sanghipuram, P.O. Moti-ber, Abdasa, Kutch, Gujarat 370 655, India

The Thane-ka Tal (Lake) is a huge natural wetland spread over 9 kms in length and 1 km in width. The wetland lies in the Etah district of Uttar Pradesh. Locally known as Thana Dariyav Ganj area the wetland is situated near the Narthar railway station and can be approached by train from Kashganj.

The main source of water for the Thane-ka tal is the Budhi-Ganga (a tributary of river Ganges). The wetland supports a large number of wintering water fowl and waders. The areas around the wetland are suitable nesting and foraging grounds for the endangered sarus cranes. An approximate 150 to 200 sarus cranes could be observed in about 50 sq. km area of the agricultural fields near the Thane-ka Tal. Four pairs of sarus were seen with one juvenile each in December 1997. About 200 open-billed storks were also seen.

Apart from supporting a huge concentration of resident and winter-migrant birds the Thane-ka tal wetland is a good source of fish for the local fishermen; about 200 people depend for their livelihood on this wetland. The luxuriant growth of lotus has choked the water in many places. In the month of June 1998, I found many resident birds actively nesting : pheasant-tailed jacanas, moorhens among others.

The local people collect lotus leaves from the wetland for serving food in marriage parties. The Thane-ka tal wetland is not a protected area and it is a hunting ground for the local

poachers. An approximate 80,000 to 100,000 waterbirds seek shelter here during the winter. About 10,000 to 15,000 resident waterbirds use the wetland round the year. The typha grasses provide nesting sites to black throated weaver birds, marsh warblers and others.



FOOD OF THE BLUE ROCK THRUSH.

ANISH P. ANDHERIA, No. 2, Sagar Building, V.P. Road, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 058

One correspondence that interested me was about the "blue rock thrush on a breakfast table". The author mentions about a female blue rock thrush feeding on the leftovers at a small dhaba in Dajipur. Here, I had a similar experience with a male blue rock thrush *Monticola solitarius*.

I stay at Andheri (west), a crowded suburb in Mumbai. However, there are many trees viz., *Ficus benghalensis*, *Ficus religiosa*, *Michelia champaca*, *Salmaal malabarica*, *Peltophorum roxburghii*, *Erythrina indica* etc. along with some fruiting varieties like mulberry and *Mangifera indica* which support many birds - tailor bird, ashy wren warbler, chiffchaff, purple rumped sunbird, golden oriole, coppersmith, red vented bulbul, magpie robin, rose ringed parakeet, common myna, whitebrowed fantail flycatcher, whitebreasted kingfisher and of late the redbreasted parakeet. The arrival of other birds like the grey headed myna and rosecoloured starlings coincide with the flowering of the red silk cotton. In addition to these there are a few spotted owlets and barn owls which have established their territory in our locality. The common pariah kite, house crow, blue rock pigeon and the house sparrow are of course omnipresent. There is an occasional sighting of the black drongo, rufousbacked shrike, spotted munia and hoopoe. The list will give you a picture of the urban bird-life in Andheri (it is not exhaustive though).

Amongst these, some like the golden oriole, rufous backed shrike, hoopoe, greyheaded myna, and chiffchaff are becoming rarer with every passing year. However, there is some reprieve due to new entrants like the redbreasted parakeets *Psittacula alexandri* (which I have already discussed in a previous communication) and the blue rock thrush *Monticola solitarius*.

Since the past two years, I have been witness to a solitary male blue rock thrush visiting my backyard to relish the ripened mulberry between January and April. There is nothing extraordinary about its presence in a crowded city as can be gathered from the Handbook of Birds of India & Pakistan by Ali and Ripley, where it has been clearly mentioned that this bold bird frequents ruins, ancient buildings, and even occupied premises. However, what surprises me is its preference for chapati (made out of wheat) and cooked rice. After enjoying the mulberry, this male thrush invariably comes on to the ground to share pieces of chapati

and other food with the resident house sparrows. The sparrows also do not seem to mind this intrusion. Initially, I ignored it as an aberrant behaviour. However, on consistently observing it with the sparrows during a specific time interval, I began searching for a betitting explanation. The bold nature of the bird allowed me to lure it with bits of chapati and rice on regular basis.

This finding complements the one made by Mr. Mukund and therefore raises questions regarding the shift in dietary habits of certain birds. This may be attributed to the unavailability or lack of traditional food in their wintering grounds. With more data, we may be in a position to learn about alternative food sources of birds - specially the migratory ones who need to build up their fat reserves for their migratory journey.

In order to save the remaining life-forms, it is crucial to study their behaviour within human settlements rather than in remote untouched wilderness which is becoming a rarity. Very soon, the factor that will decide whether a species survives or perishes will be its adaptability to the disturbance caused by the most powerful animal on earth - *Homo sapiens*.



THE WHITE BELLIED TREE PIE. Lt. Gen. B.C. NANDA, Hebbettgiri, K. Nidugane P.O., Madikeri 571 201, Kodagu Dist

The white bellied tree pie *Dendrocitta leucogastra* is seen quite often in the hills of Kodagu. They are however normally seen in ones and twos, along with a hunting party of other birds, the party invariably includes one or two racket-tailed drongos. I was therefore surprised when on 2nd September 1998, at 0700 hrs I came across a gathering of these beautiful birds, about 2 km away from my house on the Abbi Falls Road.

I counted twelve, but there were more lurking in the tall trees, a little further into the woods on both sides of the road.

About a month ago, a dead specimen of the white bellied tree pie was brought to me. The illustrations in all the books on birds, did no justice to the bird that lay in my hand. In many ways. It is as beautiful as the paradise flycatcher - perhaps a little awkward in its movements.

The grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* is back. I spotted the first one in my garden on 3rd of September this year. Last year I recorded sighting the first one on 2nd September. I therefore presume the fantail snipe *Gallinago gallinago* and the pintail snipe *Gallinago stenura* are in. In the old days the shotguns would have been out.



ENCOUNTERS WITH BIRDS AT DHARAMSALA. Lt. GEN. BALJIT SINGH, 'SAKHUA', P.O. McCluskie Ganj, Dist. Ranchi, Bihar 829 208

In my article (NLBW Vol.38 No.3) I was unsure of two identifications. We visited Dharamsala again this year in the month of June. And I was lucky to encounter again both these species of birds, in situations permitting prolonged observation.

The bird which I presumed could have been the rufous babbler (page 44, para 8) is in fact the streaked laughing thrush. I chanced to find it nesting and was able to observe from close quarters, on several occasions, leaving no doubt about its identity.

As for the other bird (page 44, para 11) my apologies first for overlooking a typing error which assigns to this bird a non-existent name (firecrested tit). The bird is the firecapped tit. There is no doubt of the identity anymore.

On this visit I met a young Dutch, post-graduate in environmental science and working with the Dalai Lama's establishment at Dharamsala on a garbage clearing/recycling project. He has identified 352 species of birds upto about 30 km around Dharamsala over the past three years. He has compiled a photo album of more than 300 of them. I had the benefit of cross-checking with him the identifications of birds I had observed. More of this visit, later.

The Redbreasted Parakeet - Escape to Mumbai, by Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh

Anish P Andheria's discovery of redbreasted parakeet (NLBW, Vol.38 No.2) in and around his home at Andheri (West) Mumbai was very interesting. It was good to know that the size of the flock has over three years increased from nine to fifteen birds (fears of Dr. Asad Rahmani notwithstanding)! Lucky Mr Andheria to have the latest bird of Mumbai a regular visitor to his house.

From my general reading I know of one more case where a species of parakeet has set up a new house, separated from its known range by at least one continent and a sea. Perhaps it was in 1996 when I read somewhere that the Alexandrine parakeet is now firmly established, and in a viable population, among the parks and groves along the Thames in London. The author presumed that a few enterprising parakeets had engineered their escape from the aviary in the London Zoo, some from their cages in pets shops and a few from their benefactors' (?) homes. That is how it began.

If the original stock of these escapees was from India, I would rank this the best of free-market enterprises, colonising the colonisers!!



FROM SPECS TO BINOCS.....Ms. BAIJU SANYAL, Wildlife Protection Society of India, Thapar House, 124, Janpath, New Delhi 110 001

My earliest memories associated with birds are not particularly sweet. Every morning hundreds of crows perched in the jackfruit tree overlooking my terrace with their relentless cawing adding to the cacophony of the honking Calcutta traffic. For me then the occasional chirp of sparrows and the innocuous crooning of a pigeon sounded sweet and refreshing for a change. Scavengers! as they are called, serving their ecological function in a polluted environment - noble enough but it did not appeal to my young mind in pursuit of the more colourful.

I moved to my new home in Safdarjung Enclave in New Delhi where I soon discovered that I was right in front of the 'Deer Park'. The park in the early 70's was a vast undulating expanse of dry deciduous vegetation in highly degraded condition, typical of the Aravali ranges mainly consisting of a small number of Babul (*Acacia nilotica*), Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), Ber, Dhak, Jamun, Kadam, Pipal, Neem, Semal etc. making it a good nesting and perching site for a variety of birds and insects. Later a group of "green thinkers" thought and fought to transform this semi-arid piece of land into the park as it exists today. Plentiful variety of trees have since been planted including trees such as Ashoka, Eucalyptus, Sissoo etc. The park gained popularity particularly with the introduction of some fenced in population of Chital.

As I went out for my morning walks in the days that followed, the myriad hues of many an unknown bird slowly began to appeal to my senses. I began asking myself "in the different notes that they sing what cryptic messages do they carry"?

My serious bird watcher's journey began one warm Saturday morning on July the 11th and my pursuit of the more colorful began in right earnest. The chestnut blotches of the grey partridge and its famous 'pateela pateela' call, the 'did-he-do-it' of the redwattled lapwing, the beautiful green bee-eater with its 'Kajal' painted eyes, the 'coop-coop-coop' of the coucal, the small, ashy colored house swifts' relentlessly flying from the old Hauz Khas monument to the trees and back in search of food, the redwhiskered bulbul confident with its crest like a soldier, the echoing 'kuoo, kuoo, kuoo' of our dear koel and the enchanting peafowl's "rain dance" captivated my attention and for a while I forgot that the maniac world ever existed around me.

Then upon the dry Acacia I saw the pied crested cuckoo with his plaintive call which sounded like 'drench-drench-drench' - the rains can't be far behind?

The habitat supports many other birds some of which I wasn't able to identify. Perhaps someday I would be able to;

but till then from my little green bird-book list the birds I observed in July :-

Redwattled lapwing, common peafowl, ring dove, roseringed parakeet, coucal, hoopoe, racket-tailed drongo, redvented bulbul, large grey babbler, magpie robin, grey hornbill, common myna, Indian robin, koel, bank myna, purple sunbird, little green bee-eater, large green barbet, Brahmini myna, golden oriole, crimson breasted barbet, red turtle dove, pied myna, tree pie, cattle egret, house swift, grey partridge, pied crested cuckoo, pond heron, redwhiskered bulbul, white breasted kingfisher, whitebreasted waterhen, yelloweyed babbler, jungle babbler, ashy wren warbler, tailor bird, little green heron, jungle crow, house crow, house sparrow, yellow throated sparrow, whitebacked munia, spotted munia, stone curlew, blue jay, pariah kite, shikra.



SIGHTINGS OF INDIAN SKIMMER (*Rynchops albicollis*) IN RAJASTHAN FAR FROM ITS FLUVIAL (Riverain) HABITAT. HARIKIRAT SINGH SANGHA, B-27, Gautam Margh, Hanuman Nagar, Jaipur 302 021, and MANOJ KULSHRESHTHA, B-33, Sethi Colony, Jaipur 302 004

Rajasthan is one the most arid states of India and there are no major rivers in the state except the Chambal and its tributaries which flow on the eastern boudary of Rajasthan and form the inter-state boundary with Madhya Pradesh. All the other rivers of Rajasthan are ephemeral and flow only during the monsoon. Thus the state lacks a fluvial habitat for which the Indian skimmer is highly adapted in its feeding. To quote Salim Ali "Hunts actively up and down the river in daytime as well as during moonlit nights. Skims with quivering wing tips over placid water, with tip of lower mandible immersed at an angle lightly plowing the surface, the short upper mandible raised open in readiness to snap on any fish touching the edge and hold it in a vice-like grip".

According to Ali and Ripley (1981) the Indian skimmer is a rare vagrant to inland tanks. Roberts (1991) says it is rarely encountered away from large rivers and only frequents inland lakes or tanks and ponds while on passage. This note documents past and recent records of the Indian skimmer in Rajasthan from non-fluvial habitats. Three or four birds were shot by Dr. Newman at Mount Abu and were included in his list by Butler (1876). While studying the ZSI collection of birds from Rajasthan, Majumdar and Roy (1993) came across a specimen collected from village Dangiwas, Jodhpur on 10th August, 1966. One Indian skimmer was sighted by M.K. at Jod-Beed, near Bikaner on 16th May, 1992 (see table). Interestingly, drainage water from the city collects at Jod-Beed.

All the other records of the species are from eastern Rajasthan. Six birds were seen feeding in one of the aquatic blocks of Keoladeo National Park, Bharathpur on 4th February, 1998 (Sivasubramanian 1992). Seven birds were recorded on 14th May, 1989 at Alniya dam in Kota (Vyas 1990). M.K. has also recorded Indian skimmers in Kota from Alniya and Ranpur lakes. The birds seen at the lakes of Kota are probably birds which are seen on the Chambal river which flows quite close to these lakes and were encountered while on passage. The other records are from fairly large lakes of Jaipur, Sawai Madhopur and Dausa districts (see table).

Date	Site	No. of Birds	Comment
14.01.87	Chandlai, Jaipur	1	Extensive spread of water due to good monsoon
02.03.89	Ranpur, Kota	5	Close to the Chambal river
21.05.89	Alnia, Kota	3	Close to the Chambal river
08.07.89	Alnia, Kota	1	Close to the Chambal river
13.12.89	Ranpur, Kota	2	Close to the Chambal river
28.03.93	Jod-Beed, Bikaner	1	-
11.12.94	Kalakho, Dausa	1	Extensive spread of water due to good monsoon
12.12.94	Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur	1	Irregularly recorded
31.10.96	Soorwal, Sawai Madhopur	1	Close to the Banas and Chambal rivers

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EUROPEAN BEE-EATERS *MEROPS APIASTER* IN SOUTHERN INDIA. L. SHYAMAL, No.1, 12-B Main Road, Muthyalanagar, Bangalore 560 054

The recent spate of notes on the European bee-eater in Southern India is interesting. The first report of the species in this area seems to have been made in 1952 by Manisha Basu Ray, who wrote of a collection of specimens from the Mettur dam area (JBNHS 65(3):776). Eric Lott wrote about their regular occurrence in the Kaveri river valley (upstream of Mettur dam) from the mid 80's onwards (JBNHS 82:41, NLBW 29(9-10):16). Reports of sightings in recent times from the Kaveri river belt and elsewhere seem to be on the rise. The species is distinctive in having yellow back patches (scapulars) and the probability of a mistaken identify should be low.

In a recent discussion on the internet natural-history group, Priyantha Wijesinghe suggested that the regular occurrence of the species in Sri Lanka was a recent phenomenon. The following extract from the Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Volume 4, edited by Stanley Cramp suggests the range of the species is in a state of flux.

"Range fluctuating with occasional breeding outside normal limits at any one period. Some signs of Northward expansion in 1840's followed by recession from c. 1875. Better documented increase beginning in 1920's and 30's with some expansion in Central Europe in later 1940's followed by more marked expansion further West from mid 60's (reaching even Denmark and Sweden)."

The present regularity of sightings in Southern India may be indicative of an Easterly expansion in its breeding range. The following extract from the same book suggests an even more exciting albeit unlikely possibility.

"Small numbers breed in Southern Africa (A discrete population which moves Northwards within Southern Africa after breeding)."



RECORDS OF ROSY PELICAN IN ASSAM DURING SUMMER, BIBHAB KUMAR TALUKDAR*, RATHIN BARMAN* and RANJAN KUMAR DAS**, *Animal Ecology & Wildlife Biology Lab., Deptt. of Zoology, Gauhati University, Guwahati 781 014, Assam, India, **Divisional Forest Officer, Western Assam Wildlife Division, Dolabari, Tezpur 784 001, Assam, India

The state of Assam comprising an area of around 78,438 sq km, situated in the North eastern part of India, harbours two species and one sub-species of threatened pelicans (Ali & Ripley 1983), viz., rosy pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*,

dalmatian pelican *Pelecanus philippensis crispus* and spotbilled pelican *Pelecanus philippensis*, of which the former two are migratory, while the *Pelecanus philippensis* is a resident of Assam, and breeds there. (Talukdar, 1995).

During winter the rosy pelicans are mainly observed in the Brahmaputra valley, in places like Kaziranga National Park, Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary, Panidihing Bird Sanctuary, Majuli River Island and some part of the Brahmaputra river. The dalmatian pelican is restricted to some protected areas including Kaziranga.

On 13 August 1998, we went to Burachapori Wildlife Sanctuary crossing the mighty river Brahmaputra by Speed Boat during the high flood period. While returning from Burachapori, at around 4.30 PM, we observed a large white bird in the middle of the river near Tezpur. We went close to the bird and found that it was a rosy pelican *Pelecanus onocrotalus*. We were surprised to see the bird during summer, as no authentic record of rosy pelicans during summer in Assam was available. It was in a water depth of around 6 ft and there was a sandy shore area (locally called Chapori) with grassland vegetation. We got down from our speedboat and tried to go close to the pelican, but the bird took off while we were approaching it. However, video filming was done while the pelican took off, to authenticate our record. This is probably the first time the rosy pelican has been recorded in Assam during summer. During the visit to Burachapori Wildlife Sanctuary by the speed boat we also saw common sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*, river lapwing *Vanellus duvaucelii*, lesser adjutant stork *Leptoptilos javanicus*, cotton teal *Nettapus coromandelianus*, spotbilled duck *Anas poecilorhyncha poecilorhyncha*.

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COMMENTS. THOMAS GAY I.C.S. (Retd), Megha Rashtra, Warje - Pune

Model article

NLBW No 3 had three pieces which especially pleased me. Besides your own piece there was Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh's piece which I found a perfect model of what our Newsletter should give us. Let all of us follow this outstanding example. I was also thrilled by A.J. Urli's piece on Oystercatchers' competition for loss of feeding time due to disturbances because I used to know those parts in Exmouth, and the Ex. estuary very well as a boy. The tide runs out at incredible

speed, and I will never forget the night when my small row boat got caught in an ebb tide and firmly stranded on a sand bank as I tried to row across from Exmouth to Starcross. It was only the passing of some light travelling boats that saved me from a night of shivering in the thinnest of summer clothes. 73 years ago it was.

Inappropriate Names

If and when I recover some health, I'd like to write a letter to the Newsletter on the subject of Inappropriate naming of birds by our pioneer ornithologists. I think particularly of the "red-whiskered bulbul", whose red whiskers can be noticed only from a fairly close range, whereas he has a far more conspicuous feature in his tall crest which can be seen from afar. Why was't he christened "Unicorn", or even "Rhinoceros" bulbul? Was it because our early birders so often used to shoot their birds, and so could observe them in the hand?



**CDURTSHIP DISPLAY OF LARGE PIED WAGTAIL
MOTACILLA MADERASPATENSIS IN KOKRAJHAR,
ASSAM. SUBHASH CHANDA, Subhashpally, Ward No.3,
Near Bengali High School, Kokrajhar 783 370 Assam, India.**

On the morning of 25th May 95 at about 0630 hours, I was watching birds from a boat anchored by the side of the river Gourang, which is the western boundary of Kokrajhar Town (Headquarter of Kokrajhar District, 26°27'N 90° 15'E).

Suddenly a chizit-chizit call attracted my attention and I noticed a pair of large pied wagtails *Motacilla maderaspatensis* fly in and perch on the opposite corner of the boat. After some time the male started performing a peculiar flight display. The female (dull coloured) was sitting, and the male was displaying, springing up into the air, gaining in height step by step upto the height of about 10 feet above the water and then descending vertically by wings paired together behind its back. With the tail held aloft and legs dangling it came down to the water level, and then returned beside the female by typical undulating flight. During the display the male produced a pleasant high-pitched whistling note repeatedly for about 15 minutes. I observed the same display on 27.05.95.

The nesting season of the large pied wagtail is from March to September (Ali, S, 1992).

But according to the Book of Indian Birds (Ali, S, 1992) the distribution of this wagtail is throughout India, excepting Assam, and in the Checklist of the Birds of Assam (Choudhury, A, 1990) it is described as an uncommon species and its seasonal status is unclear.

So, sighting the large pied wagtail displaying in its nesting season suggests that it breeds somewhere in and around Kokrajhar district and this finding is important because no such record has been reported earlier.

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**OCCURRENCE OF SCARLETBACKED FLOWERPECKER
(*Dicaeum cruentatum*) AT UDHAGAMANDALAM, NILGIRIS.
S. THIRUMURTHI, Forest College and Research Institute,
Mettupalyam, 641 301 and C.P. BHANUMATHI, Nilgiri Wildlife
and Environment Association, Mettupalyam 641 301**

During a routine birdwatching schedule in the Botanic Gardens, Udhagamandalam during the last week of July, 1998, we encountered a small sparrow sized but somewhat slimmer bird with glossy shining blue black wings of iridescent nature. The forehead, back and rump were crimson while the tail tip was blue black. The throat and breast were buff white. The bird was feeding on the nectar from wildflowers with short flights here and there. Soon another bird of similar size, olive in colour, with dark brown wings came along and the two made short sorties and continued their nectar feeding. These birds were identified as male and female scarletbacked flowerpeckers (*Dicaeum cruentatum*) by referring to Ali (1996) on the spot. The observation was done on a cloudy cool morning around 10.20 AM.

Among Indian flowerpeckers, three species viz., *Dicaeum agile* (thickbilled flowerpecker), *D. erythrorhynchos* (tickell's flowerpecker) and *D. concolor* (plaincoloured flowerpecker) alone are reported from Tamilnadu or for that matter from South India (Baker and Inglis, 1930; Ali 1969 and 1996; Taher and Pittie, 1989; Chakravarthy and Tejasvi, 1993; and Neelankantan, 1996). The scarletbacked flowerpecker (*D. cruentatum*) is reported to occur in Arunachal Pradesh, hills and plains of other parts of North East and W. Bengal within India besides Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar. Its migration to South has not been reported anywhere. The only mention of this bird in Tamilnadu was by Badsha (1997) who has included it in his 'Checklist of Birds of Tamilnadu'.

The present sighting of *D. cruentatum* is perhaps the first record with reference to an area in Tamilnadu. Further observations are in progress to estimate the extended habitat and population dynamics of this species in Nilgiris.

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OCCURRENCE OF PLUMBEOUS REDSTART (*Rhyacornis fuliginosus*) IN MALDA DISTRICT WEST BENGAL.
ARUNAYAN SHARMA, N.S. Road, In Front of T.O.P, Malda 732 101, West Bengal.

In the bright morning of 3rd December 1997 I went birding at Adina Deer Park of Malda district, situated 20 km from English Bazar. Geographic location is 25°0'N, 88°10'E. Altitude is 39.39 m A.S.L.

Around 1125 hours I heard a metallic call of a bird. The vocalization was something like "Zree-Zree" / "Zeet-Zeet" / "Kree-Kree". I followed the call and recognised the sparrow-minus-size bird. The bird was constantly flitting from one boulder to another restlessly. The colour of bill, toes and legs was as black/slaty grey.

While resting on boulders it shivered while constantly flicking its tail. The overall colour grey/slaty blue, tail colour brownish/chestnut.

Soon another bird appeared and I observed them for more than 30 minutes.

After consulting the references I identified the birds as plumbeous redstart (*Rhyacornis fuliginosus*), male and female. Plumbeous redstarts are birds of rocky areas, near streams, rushing torrents, rivers and water falls. They are found throughout the Himalayan ranges, from Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh. Also in the hills of Meghalaya and Manipur. They breed mainly between 1200 m to 4300 m, but in winter they come down to the foothills.

This is the first time that plumbeous redstarts have been seen in Malda district.



GREEN BARBET *Megalaima zeylanica* FEEDING ON THE TENDER LEAVES OF TEJPATTA *Cinnamomum tamala*. DR SARASWATHY UNNITHAN, Scientist-in-charge of Bird Section, BNHS, Hornbill House, S.B. Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023

In July 1997 I was at my home town Quilon in Kerala. The backyard of our house has many Tejpatta trees (*Cinnamomum tamala*). The trees have tender leaves which look like bunches of deep pink flowers about 20 cm. long. From 06.30 each morning I noticed small flocks of green barbets feeding on the tender leaves. I could not identify them through the thick foliage whether they were small green barbet, *Megalaima viridis* or green barbet *Megalaima zeylanica*. The call was typical of *M. zeylanica* "Kutroo, Kutroo..." *M. viridis* has a softer call which sounds "pucok, pucok"¹. Green barbets *M. zeylanica* are known to eat flower petals². Consuming tender leaves by them is not reported earlier.

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AN INSTANCE OF CROW MOBBING A COUCAL, AT DHARWAD. DR. J.C. UTTANGI, H.No. 36, Mission Compound, Dharwad 580 001

The non-parasitic coucal, normally does not interfere with crows in any way but, the house crow looking at it sometimes believes that the blood-red eyes of the bird it is looking at, is the male koel and therefore attacks it. Otherwise there is no reason why it should mob it. A rare instance of house crow mobbing a coucal took place on Friday the 17th October 1997 in the backyard of our house at Dharwad.



WHICH PIGEONS ARE THESE ?. TH. PAWLEN SINGHA, Lecturer, Department of Chemistry, Cachar College, Silchar, P.O. Silchar 788 001, Dist. Cachar, Assam

Last year, twice on separate dates, I noticed two pairs of pigeons which matched well with the description given against the name of common green pigeon or yellow legged green pigeon (*Treron phoenicoptera*). But each of those pigeons lacked lilac patch on their shoulders. The diagnostic yellow leg of common green pigeon was very much present in them. Will it be common green pigeon or its variety or some other species? I am eager to know your expert comments.



PARADISE POISONED by Mark Cocker

During the 1990s the weather patterns in Spain's Andalucia read like a parable from the book of Genesis. During the early part of the decade it experienced several years of drought. I remember scouring a huge area east of the Guadalquivir river in the spring of 1995 and being unable to find a single body of fresh water. One lake normally smothered with waterbirds had been converted to a dusty, ochre-stained basin about the size of a small town. By the end some residents were allowed just an hour of water a day and there were dire predictions of environmental catastrophe.

Yet during the past three years matters have swung full circle and last winter was the wettest on record, the rains sweeping away roads and bridges. This created new problems for the people of Andalucia, but for the province's premier wildlife reserve, Donana National Park, it has been blissful. When we visited this vast area of freshwater marsh it had drawn deeply on those life-giving rains and looked full to satiation. Lagoons stretched to a distant horizon and splashing through them were the wild horses of the *marismas*, doubled in size by enormous reflections so they looked like gleaming silver or chestnut monsters. The entire region was steeped in green and the flowers were extraordinary. One species could carpet a whole area for hundred of metres, turning it bright pink; elsewhere they might all be golden yellow.

It is the scale of Donana that hits you. At 180,000 hectares this wetland is almost twice the size of the combined 147 reserves of Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, itself the largest environmental non-governmental organisation in Europe. During an excursion our vehicle bumped for hours across a network of tracks, yet we saw only one tiny section of the park.

However, we covered sufficient ground to find clearings grazed by more than 50 wild boar, many sows accompanied by stripy piglets no more than a few days old. Above one panorama of pines we saw scores of black kites wheeling through the midday heat-haze. Turning leisurely among them was a Spanish imperial eagle, one of the world's rarest raptors and, together with the Spanish lynx, the key flag-ship species



for Donana. Literally every bush seemed to be bursting with the endless sobbing of nightingales. It seems shameful to admit, but we were growing weary of Europe's most celebrated songster.

Donana looked and felt like a park in its absolute prime. How extraordinary now to reflect that within hours of these scenes the Guadiana river was inundated with 5,000,000 cubic metres of toxic waste from a Swedish-Canadian owned mine just a few kilometres upstream. Residues of zinc, copper, silver and lead are already taking a toll of the area's fish and other aquatic life. One shudders to think of the implications once these corpses wash up in the park itself, as some undoubtedly will.

Black kites, for instance, constantly patrol riverbanks and beaches for dead fish, as indeed will wild boar. Even Donana's regal symbols, the lynx and eagle, are not above scavenging, particularly when they have young to feed. Some of the largest breeding colonies of herons are located close to areas badly hit by the toxic sludge. Twice a year millions of birds migrate through the park and in winter it is home to 250,000 wildfowl. Although the Spanish government is fending off suggestions that Donana will be seriously affected, the true impact will only be known after months and probably years. But even now it looks like some nightmare visitation straight out of Exodus.

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Cover : **Whiteheaded Babbler** (*Turdoides affinis*) : A well known species of the South Indian plains, is usually found in noisy squeaking parties of 6 to 8 birds. The active & agile feeding party hops around the ground turning over the leaves and when disturbed fly up into the trees with scolding calls expressing their unique hysterical temperaments, culminating in three or four clear and loud trill *trr-ri-ri-ri*. The population of white headed babbler is thinning out in Bangalore and its suburbs.

Photo by S. Sridhar, ARPS